WATERSHED OF THE YEAR-1962

Each year the steering committee of the National Watershed Congress selects the outstanding small watershed project for the Watershed of the Year Award. This year honors went to the Brownell Creek Watershed located near Syracuse, Nebraska. This was one of the 60 pilot projects, the forerunner of the Small Watershed Program authorized by Public Law 566.

A small watershed project has converted the flood prone Brownell Creek area into a safer place to farm and has opened up outdoor recreational opportunities unique to the area. The 16,000-acre watershed near Syracuse, Nebraska, once suffered flood damages amounting to more than $12,000 a year. The devastating floods of 1947 and the early 1950's nearly crippled the area. Now, after completion of the Brownell Creek pilot watershed project, the farmers and landowners can watch the rain fall with the knowledge it carries little threat to the community.

Completion of the project was no easy task. The moderate to steeply rolling land intensified the flood and erosion problems in the watershed which was almost 80 percent under cultivation. Concentrated conservation measures were needed to slow down the runoff water and stabilize the highly erosive soils. Because of this soil condition, three-fourths of the upland conservation measures had to be installed before the Federal Government would begin building the floodwater retarding structures. Farmers in the sponsoring group, the Otoe Soil and Water Conservation District, got busy. The landowners recognized the dire need for watershed protection. Many became dedicated to the project. An example of the excellent cooperation is witnessed by the fact that all easements for the larger structures were granted without charge by the landowners.

Of the 127 farmers in the watershed area, 112 are cooperators in the soil conservation district. The intense desire for success in the project is reflected in the measures applied on the land. Now protecting the watershed's soils are 600 miles of terraces, 350 acres of grass waterways, 7,400 acres of contour farming, and 12.8 miles of diversions.

These measures are backed up by nine floodwater dams capable of holding back 1,797 acre feet of floodwater and discharging it slowly over a period of time down creeks and streams. The 38 smaller grade stabilization structures will detain an additional 190 acre feet of runoff water.

The first major structure was barely completed when the area's residents began to realize the recreational opportunities the small watershed lakes afforded. As the first reservoir began to fill with water, it was stocked with fish. A sportsmen's club leased the five-acre lake and four adjacent acres for developing a recreation area. The club now has a small boat dock, picnic tables, fireplaces, playground equipment, and trap shooting field, and annually stocks the lake with fish purchased from a commercial hatchery.

The second reservoir was developed as a public fishing area and stocked with fish by the Nebraska Game Commission. Residents from Omaha, some fifty miles away, have made good use of the fishing facilities.

As more and more structures were completed, recreational areas were developed. Most of the nine reservoirs are stocked with bass, bluegill, and channel cat in cooperation with the Nebraska Game Commission and the Federal Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife.

Developments such as wildlife plantings and trees for both beauty and shade have been made around some sites, and access routes have been provided.

It took the farmers and landowners seven years to complete the Brownell Creek watershed project. They are now looking toward the future, a future safe from floods, and a future that holds recreational opportunities never before available in the area.

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Soil Conservation Service

Picture Story No. 144
July 1962

These two aerial photos show the same area of the Brownell Creek watershed before and after conservation measures were installed. Terraces and contour farming practices keep the runoff water from eroding the fields. The grade stabilization structure catches the excess rainfall and releases it slowly down the stream. NEB-2067 and NEB-2069

Cover Photo -- the 16,000 - acre Brownell Creek watershed, has nine major flood prevention dams to prevent heavy rains from destroying valuable land. The small lakes formed by these dams have brought new water based recreational opportunities to the area. NEB-2066

Soils in the Brownell Creek watershed, like those throughout western Nebrosko, ore highly erosive. Excess water cut deeply into the roadside above. At the right is a view after conservation measures were taken to heal the gully. NEB-2065 and NEB-2065B

At the left a former checks o multifloro rose hedge which he planted on the contour. Miles of rose were planted in the watershed to provide cover, food and travel lanes for wildlife. Above two Boy Scouts show off their catch from one of the watershed lakes developed for recreation. NEB-2068 and NEB-2072

Magazines and newspapers may obtain glossy prints of any of these photographs from the Photography Division, Office of Information U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington 25, D.C. Others may purchase prints (8x10) at $1.10 each from the same address.

THE SMALL WATERSHED PROGRAM

The Small Watershed Program was authorized by Public Law 566 in 1954 as a means to bridge the gap between the conservation work done on individual farms and that done on the larger river basins. Through this Act, farmers and landowners in watersheds under 250,000 acres in size can obtain technical and financial assistance from the Federal Government in protecting the watershed's natural resources.

Watershed projects are initiated by local sponsoring groups. They provide for multipurpose benefits such as flood prevention, agricultural water management, municipal water supply, fish and wildlife, and recreation.

The success of the watershed approach to conservation is reflected in its popularity. As of June 1962 a total of 1,685 applications, covering more than 119 million acres, had been received by the Department of Agriculture. Of that number 755 had been authorized for planning, of which 373 are in actual operation. The act is administered by the Soil Conservation Service.

The Brownell Creek watershed project has allowed development of recreational facilities that were scarce in this region of Nebraska. Practically all nine reservoirs in the watershed have been stocked with fish. Recreation in the form of fishing, boating, swimming, picnicking, and camping will run into thousands of man days annually. NEB-2073 and NEB-2074